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ABSTRACT

Growth of child care, preschool, and special needs services in the past 10 years in New South Wales (Australia) has left the early childhood professional with a wide variety of systems, both governmental and non-governmental, to consider as support for the child and the family. Between 1990 and 1995, in response to a perceived need for interdisciplinary communication in dealing with this array of services, a series of joint meetings was held between school and prior-to-school staff in one region. The first forum was designed as a roundtable conference in which service providers--including school and preschool staff, psychologists, welfare agencies, and family support groups--presented materials on their function and needs. A recognition of the importance of personalizing intervention services was gained, and a subsequent series of meetings between school and prior-to-school sectors was conducted. A major issue in these meetings was managing the transition to school, including utilization of shared information and resources, visiting systems, and parent involvement. Examples of the collaboration's successes include continuing visits by school staff to preschools to meet children and talk with parents, and preschool staff involvement at the school level with advice on development and specific problems or talents displayed by children. (Contains 10 references.) (EV)

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"THE EDUCATIONAL INTERFACE: ACTION AND REACTION: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH"

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the results of collaboration between school and before-school staff over a series of joint meetings in response to a perceived need for communication. It examines a model used for functional exchange, and reports on the initial reactions and following events. Implications for communication and collaboration are examined for both sectors. The aim of the paper is to report on action within a divergent group who met for common needs and to show how this group endeavoured to maintain personal and program continuity through mutual support. The positive aspects of communication, sharing of resources, combined inservice and mutual understanding of programs across settings; increased support for children, families and teachers.

In NSW many changes at the 0-8 years level have occurred over the last ten years. The growth of child care and preschool facilities has shown substantial increase (Greenblat & Ochiltree 1993). Earlier entry to school now means that children as young as four years six months of age may commence school (Cividin 1995). Early entry for gifted children at a younger age is also available. Support services identifying special needs such as Early School Support have spread within schools and Early Intervention services have rapidly increased in prior-to-school care. Recognition of the individual needs of children and families in the Early Childhood years has expanded and teachers have recognised the necessity for interdisciplinary and across context communication and support. In a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Early Childhood Education (1995) the Australian College of Education stated that "the heart of many coordination dilemmas in early childhood services" was the multiple portfolios attached to this area by government. The Early Childhood professional is faced with a wide variety of systems both government and non-government to consider when supporting the child and the family.

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This report details events which have taken place in a country area between 1990 to 1995 in response to the changes and growing need for interdisciplinary communication. To provide for the needs a forum was initiated in the form of a round conference. Each service provider was invited to speak for five minutes about their service and their needs, and also to respond briefly to questions. All providers supplied written material for distribution such as pamphlets and policies. At the end of the formal session individuals were able to talk to providers on an informal basis.

Initial action to provide information and discussion with a contact person was most successful with informal discussions leading to clarification of referral issues, access to services and ways that providers might support each other and the children and families involved. Service providers who attended the forum were representatives of their services and ranged across: private and public schools, community and private preschools and care centres, psychologists, school counsellors, welfare agencies such as Family Support, Dept

of Community Services, Health Services such as Speech Pathologists and Occupational Therapists, and family support systems such as single parent groups.

Being able to refer to a known person and having background information on the service allowed service providers individual access rather than requesting intervention services. In this manner the children and families involved were more effectively supported across the extensive range of Early Childhood systems. Individual teachers were enthused to contact therapists to discuss suitable activities based on programs discussed with parents and a less fragmented support for children became more evident.

As a reaction to the initial forum the school and before-school sector planned a series of discussions which would take the form of a meeting once per school term. Whilst the initial meeting was held at a school, subsequent meetings were held in alternating settings of schools, preschools and health services. The school feeder preschools were co-organisers of the next meeting, arranging speakers and meeting brochures. No formal executive was elected so that the process remained fluid. Records were kept at a primary source which changed from time to time. Some minor funding was received from the Department of School Education for stationary and mailing.

Before-school and school staff met to establish their needs, discuss programs and methods of record keeping as well as how they supported families . Common problems such as special needs access and integration support, speech therapy and language needs were addressed through additional meetings as the group saw fit. The issue of transition to school and the wide variety of methods became an ongoing process but was the first major topic for discussion. Belsky and MacKinnon (1994) note the needs for both before-school settings and school to recognise the experiences of the child in both settings as well as within the family to fully assist the child.

Each school and feeder before-school centres met as small groups during the remainder of the term. Some preschools had to attend more than one meeting as they fed several schools. Centres and schools in geographically isolated areas usually had only one or two feeder before-school services. The following term all small groups discussed their results and also proposals for assisting each other and supporting the transition process. Geo graphical isolation enabled a somewhat closer relationship to exist however once services and schools had met they discovered common inservice needs, resources they could share and discussed a variety of ways that they could assist each other to support the children and their families.

Now support was three fold: access to services and personnel on a familiar basis; joint understanding of needs and sharing of inservice; and support for children entering school through a variety of visit systems and parent involvement. The latter grew with discussion and time, with some schools inviting children for several mornings, for special events, or setting up specific transition visits by the children from the preschool as a group. One issue which was of concern was confidentiality of information. For example some children may be able to cope in a composite class which required children to work alone, whereas other children may require assistance in one or more areas. Clearly parental permission was essential for information to be provided across contexts. In this way a focus on the role of the parent within the interface was developed. The group continued to function in a supportive role and gradually moved to an inservice format. It became clear after several years that the original objectives had been met and that the

formal function was no longer required. Support was now effective on an informal individual needs basis.

Most recently a move to establish links with new centres by local schools has indicated that schools and centres are continuing to support each other across the interface in their own ways. One comment by a new Child Care Centre's Director recently that "in thirteen years of teaching she had never before been approached by a school asking could they come down and meet the children for next year's enrolment", was confirmation of the continuing reaction to the initial forum as the school had been involved in the inaugural meeting.

Another circle of ripples in the reaction was the movement of staff from the original area. Follow-up in 1995 of one such Deputy Principal revealed that the program had continued to evolve. Several contacts were being established with feeder before-school centres. Parents were involved with their children in a sessional Early Childhood program at the school for two terms at the end of the year prior to school enrolment. This involved preparation for parents, visits to the school as a group of children, as well as visits to Kindergarten classrooms and sharing recess in the playground.

A third wave of reactions was started by other. Early Intervention staff in neighbouring areas by following the formal meeting and informal once a term discussions. As a consequence each of the areas developed independently, meeting the specific needs of the staff and geographical limits. Within this structure several "Head Start" programs or series of visits from preschool and parents were started. Once again record keeping and confidentiality became an issue which was addressed in the communication cycle.

Major changes across the board were based on an understanding of other personnel working in the 0-8 years context. Contact and support were gained not only for Early Childhood professionals but also for parents and most importantly the children involved. Clearer concepts of programming in various settings emerged especially in relationship to "play- centred Curriculum" (Edson 1994) and evaluation and recording of children's performance. Readiness for school was viewed from both contexts and a need for greater support across the interface was affected by school staff visits to preschools to talk with parents, and a variety of transition process visits to schools by the children from the preschool setting to the school setting. Schools and preschools shared interest days and special visitors. Preschool staff were able to be involved at the school level with advice on development and specific problems or talents which children may display. Parental involvement across the interface was recommended from all sectors.

Ramey and Ramey (1995) state that "the traditional idea of school readiness has been expanded and today calls for open discussion among the key adults in children's lives" and stresses that the responsibility is not just with families but with "all adults, institutions and agencies that serve them". Only through clear communication between parents and the multidisciplinary areas of Early Childhood will this eventuate. Ramey and Ramey (1995) note that collaboration is most effective when supporting efforts are "timely" and "considerate". It is therefore proposed that the above model of interaction allows for individuals to establish flexible cooperation and open communication.

In arguing for schools to establish a curricula after viewing the "population of learners", Cooney (1995) supports the need for teachers to either bring the children into the school

or visit the centres prior to school. Anxiety signs from children entering school can be alleviated according to Webster (1995) if child/teacher meetings or visits take place. Vulnerable children can also be identified in this manner and plans implemented and monitored to support the child on entry (Johnston & Mermin 1994). Furthermore Cooney (1995) suggests that small periods of quality time as a gradual introduction are effective. It would seem that the staff involved in the above movement have clearly recognised the issues raised by Cooney, Webster and Ramey & Ramey. Perhaps the rural setting is a productive situation for collaboration (Kagan 1991) and is more amenable to this model. It would appear that the four functions identified by Kagan (1991) for collaboration were met through this process; that is

"a) alleviating scarcity of resources
b) expanding the narrowness of problem conceptualisation
c) improving inadequacies in human service delivery
and, d) achieving organisational reform."

It is time for all Early Childhood staff across disciplines and contexts to establish an interactive interface which will benefit children, families and staff. Being ready is in the hands of the educators not the child, staff should be ready for all children.

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